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RUEHBUL/AMEMBASSY KABUL 0527
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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 ASHGABAT 000084

SIPDIS

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STATE FOR SCA/CEN (PERRY)

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SUBJECT: Russian Ambassador on NGO Activist Zatoka

REF: Ashgabat 78

Summary

¶1. (SBU) Russian Ambassador Igor Blatov told the Charge on January 19 that the Russian Embassy had been involved with the Zatoka case for "many days" and that he had met Foreign Minister Meredov on the issue. According to Blatov:

-- Local law does not recognize dual citizenship. The government considers Zatoka exclusively a citizen of Turkmenistan so has denied the embassy consular access;

-- Though Zatoka is an "activist," his case should not be compared to that of dead journalist Ogulsapar Meredova who had close ties to the opposition. On the contrary, authorities had not bothered Zatoka in the past;

-- It is unlikely the incriminating evidence was all planted and more likely that Zatoka actually had possession of the illegal items in his apartment;

-- The best Russia could hope for was a fair trial, and in the best possible case a suspended sentence.

-- The Zatoka case threatened to mar foreign impressions of the elections and transition to a new administration, even though the case was "inherited" by the new administration. (Note: Zatoka was arrested on December 17, before Niyazov's death. End Note.)

End Summary.

Russian Embassy Involved in Case

¶2. (SBU) Russian Ambassador Blatov told Charge January 19 that the Russian Embassy had involved itself in the Zatoka case early on. (Comment: Contrary to grapevine allegations that Moscow's Ashgabat Embassy intended no action in the matter. End Comment.) Blatov had, in fact, seen FM Meredov on the matter "many days ago." Subsequently, he volunteered, Zatoka's case was raised by FM Lavrov in Lavrov's January 16 phone call to Meredov. Charge showed a copy of the MFA note post had received late January 18 (reftel), with its

detailed allegations of illegal weapons-possession charges against Zatoka. The Russian glanced at it and said it was the same information given to him in his earlier Meredov meeting.

13. (SBU) The Lavrov/Meredov phone call was amply publicized by Turkmenistan media but with no reference to the Zatoka case having featured therein, which as far as we know has not been reported by Russian media or confirmed by the Russian MFA, either. Blatov did not specify that Lavrov had called after the Russians received the MFA "evidence" against Zatoka, but that was the inference.

Planted Evidence?

14. (SBU) Blatov and Charge agreed on the gravity of the process and possible sentence Zatoka faces. The Russian thought it unlikely the evidence was planted, noting that in that context the long list of illegal material allegedly uncovered seemed overkill. "A few shotgun cartridges would have sufficed for the purpose." Perhaps most puzzling, he said, was why the authorities would want to set up Zatoka at this precise stage, if indeed this was what was happening. Zatoka's activism has been confined to ecological causes, not political dissent. His arrest came days before/before Niyazov's death, so there could be no connection there.

No Dual Citizenship under Turkmenistan's Laws

15. (SBU) Charge described the intense attention and concern in Washington and elsewhere in the United States over this case. She asked if and when the Russian Embassy planned to visit the detainee. Here Blatov and his deputy Aleksey Demin, sighing, explained that Meredov had explained that even though he was a dual citizen under

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Russian law, Zatoka was a citizen of Turkmenistan under local law; therefore, international consular conventions did not apply as far as Ashgabat was concerned. Ashgabat and Moscow agreed to a dual-citizenship regime in 2001; however, in 2004 the Government of Turkmenistan unilaterally revoked it and thenceforth did not admit the concept that a citizen of Turkmenistan could have any other citizenship.

Suspended Sentence?

16. (SBU) Blatov said the Russians have requested to meet with Zatoka anyway. Perhaps the interim leaders, who have shown a certain fresh wish for good relations abroad "and are intelligent," would accommodate the request and in general move to defuse this affair by prompting a suspended sentence or even an amnesty connected to the incoming president's inauguration. However, they would no doubt worry about this setting a precedent. The Russians had not heard the rumor about Zatoka's trial having been scheduled for the weekend of January 20/21, and disbelieved it.

Comment

17. (SBU) The Zatoka case is unlikely to have an outcome acceptable to the numerous groups concerned with his case (and who apparently have organized a significant letter-writing campaign; embassy has received at least two dozen identical letters asking for embassy to attend the trial today alone). Local authorities may very well have been harassing Zatoka when the affair started a month ago, as Zatoka was attempting to go to Moscow, but the resultant search of his apartment may have provided authorities with evidence they cannot ignore. Embassy will continue to consult with the Russians and will suggest to MFA that a suspended sentence is the right way to start off a new relationship with the international community. End Comment.

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